

WILL TÜRKİYE FIND HERSELF A PLACE IN THE NEW WORLD ORDER?

Türkiye has been a challenging actor in the regional and global politics since the early 2010s, which relies on its imperial past and soft power. This paper argues that Türkiye has embraced a conventional foreign policy principle, pursuing the balance of power, to adapt to the new multipolar world in the contemporary period, which can be defined as “the new nineteenth century.” The country can only exploit its power and resilience to the utmost extent after realizing its limitations to accomplish its regional and international foreign policy goals. Then, it might emerge as a dependable crisis mediator and a significant player in world politics.

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mid the Cyprus crisis in 1964, U.S. President Johnson's notorious letter to the Turkish Premier İsmet İnönü escalated the tensions between Ankara and Washington. İnönü responded to the American warning against a Turkish invasion of the island in a way still resonating in today's Turkish foreign policy spheres: "A new kind of world then come into being on a new pattern, and in this new world Türkiye will find herself a new place."¹ İnönü's address has become a maxim and is frequently cited in many academic and non-scholar works. However, a new kind of world did not come into being until the early 1990s, the Turkish military did not land in Cyprus until 1974, and Türkiye remained a loyal NATO-U.S. ally until today. Nevertheless, the current global crises remind Ankara that another kind of world and alliance system is at the door.

The recent discussions on the nature of competition between the United States and China, generally referenced as "the New Cold War," have evolved into worrisome debates on whether the globe is heading toward World War III since the Russian Invasion of Ukraine in 2022. While these analogies provide us with a conceptual framework to understand the times we live in and analyze the actors we look for, it is also crucial to remember the particularities of our epoch. Having said that, it is evident we entered a period of diplomatic and political confrontation, gradually turning into a military one. As the unipolar or the U.S.-led liberal order has come to an end with the rise of new global and regional powers, I argue that the current multipolar order created the conditions for a new nineteenth century. As John J. Mearsheimer predicted more than three decades ago, this new multipolar order has already made us "miss the Cold War."² The question here is whether Türkiye, another contender adopting a foreign policy relying on imperial legacy as the predecessor of an impactful nineteenth-century empire, could find herself a place in the new world order and what that place would be.

The New Nineteenth Century

The Ukrainian crisis has been treated as a symptom of the new world order. However, it was not a starting point that started a new period but a result of the new "multipolar world." The roots of this system can be traced back to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which coincided with the transformation of Communist China. While the end of history was declared in the Western hemisphere during the liberal moment in the 1990s, several regional powers emerged slowly thanks to the global economic atmosphere. Departing from the grandeur of their past, once "humiliated" Russia, Türkiye, Iran, China, India, and many others, started to contest the status

¹ "Turkey Ready to Quit Alliance," *New York Times*, 17 April 1964, 12.

² John J. Mearsheimer, "Why We Will Soon Miss the Cold War," *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 266, No. 2 (August 1990): p. 35-50.

quo and the international rules “imposed” on them by the 2000s.³ Benefiting from globalization, these powers accumulated sufficient financial, military, diplomatic, or human resources to challenge the U.S.-led order.

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In the aftermath of the 2007-2008 global financial crisis, Russia has become the earliest to oppose the West directly. Russian President Vladimir Putin declared in Munich on 10 February 2007, that “the unipolar world that had been proposed after the Cold War did not take place either.” Instead, he proposed: “There is no reason to doubt that the economic potential of the new centers of global economic growth will inevitably be converted into political influence and will strengthen multipolarity.”⁴ The international community did not realize the gradual change in the global balance of power. Nevertheless, the symptoms were everywhere: the mid-2010s migrant crisis, Brexit, the rise of what is called “populist movements,” mismanagement of the Covid crisis, and finally, the withdrawal of U.S. and allied troops from Afghanistan in 2021.

From the second half of the last decade, the conflict spread all over the world. Africa, South Europe, Central, and West Asia became the epicenters of global power competition as China heavily invested in these regions, while Russia formed substantial relationships with the regional states. Even within the Western bloc, there seemed a moment of fracture as the interests of Germany or other Mediterranean countries aligned with those of Russia or China. The Ukrainian war, however, erased some of these points of divergence within the alliance. Still, few countries, such as Hungary and Türkiye, remain neutral and act independently according to the new multipolar world order recently deemed “irreversible” by Putin.⁵

The war opened another phase in the current global situation. As “the New Cold War” is progressively turning into a large-scale and multi-actor military conflict,

³ The French Political Scientist Bertrand Badie is the first to have coined the term “the age of humiliated [powers]” in his “pathological” analysis of international relations: *Les temps des humiliés* (Paris, 2014).

⁴ Vladimir Putin, “Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy,” (President of Russia, 10 February 2007). <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>

⁵ Elena Teslova, “Putin says formation of multipolar world ‘irreversible’,” Anadolu Agency, 30 June 2022. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/putin-says-formation-of-multipolar-world-irreversible/2627320>

the rivals of the U.S.-led order, China being the most prominent and powerful contender, have started to accept the Russian thesis of multilateralism.⁶ Despite all the war efforts, Ukraine, European Union, and the United States could not succeed in bringing together “an international community” to condemn Russia and rally around Washington. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the world has been divided into two, as in the days of the *original* Cold War.

Alternatively, there is a system of ephemeral alliances bonding different actors, which are usually rivals in their regions: Iran and Israel, Türkiye and Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and India, and Brazil and Mexico have aligned in differing degrees with Russia and extensively China, for the first time in modern history. These regional powers’ common goal is to change the status quo and challenge the lines drawn during and immediately after the Cold War. While the time limit for this alignment cannot be predicted, inevitably, it would not last as long as the traditional West/East alliances of the last century. First, these actors are rivals or explicit enemies with contrasting interests in their shared regions. Secondly, they would not want any other challenger, such as China, to exploit the asymmetrical relations founded during the struggle against the old hegemon. The new nineteenth century thus will be a period of pursuit for the regional and global balance of power, a subject that Turkish diplomacy has a vast knowledge of.

The Resilience of Turkish Foreign Policy

“The long nineteenth century” taught Türkiye one lesson: balance of power. Seeking a way to prevent the empire’s dismemberment or to survive, the Ottomans realized that they needed to form temporary alliances with the great powers, who had conflicting interests in the East. Soon after Napoléon’s unsuccessful attempt to conquer Ottoman Egypt, the Sublime Port sought help from Britain and Russia. Years later, it asked for military assistance from Russia to counter the Franco-British alliance. Finally, the Ottoman decision-makers fought with London and Paris one of the large-scale wars of the century, the Crimean War, against Russia. International developments rendered this pragmatic policy useless, as the Empire dissolved after World War I. The founders of the young Turkish republic adopted this lesson once again to survive and reemerge as a regional power. The Kemalist government first allied with the Bolsheviks and later established good relations with the former occupying powers, Britain and France.

Although Türkiye officially became a NATO member in 1952, this pragmatic and

⁶ Danil Bochkov, “Russia and China are aligning their visions for a multipolar world, and eyeing new supporters,” South China Morning Post, 2 November 2022. <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3197901/russia-and-china-are-aligning-their-visions-multipolar-world-and-eyeing-new-supporters>

rational policy continued even during the height of the Cold War. Facing the Western opposition to the Turkish thesis on the Cypriot problem in the 1960s and the 1970s, Ankara did not abstain from collaborating with Moscow in many economic fields.⁷ While not engaging with any major power at the moment of Western triumph in the 1990s and early 2000s, Türkiye still refused to comply with the United States demands to impose sanctions on Iran or to authorize the deployment of American troops on Turkish territory during the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's two-decade-long rule did not change much in this approach. Despite the first ten years of his premiership being marked by partnerships with Washington and European capitals, much has changed in the second half of his leadership. The most evident reason for this change was the more controlling turn on the social and political life as an aftermath of Gezi Park Protests in 2013.

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Nevertheless, this explanation still needs to be more complex and adequate. Firstly, it assumes that the then-prime minister or the incumbent president has been the only decision-maker in Turkish foreign policy. A growing Turkish military-industrial complex, internationally renowned for its unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), the domestic political actors, the Islamic and secular bourgeoisie, and finally, the public opinion play non-neglected roles in determining foreign policy principles and actions. Moreover, this dynamic multi-actor structure causes foreign policy changes, such as Turkish involvement in the Syrian Civil War, relations with the Gulf countries, or rapprochement with Turkic states.

The second and most crucial factor is Türkiye's pursuit of “a new place” within the changing world order since the early 2010s. Erdoğan's Türkiye has already been a contender in regional politics and a challenger of the status quo. The famous slogan of the Turkish president is “the World is bigger than five” (in Turkish, “*Dünya beşten büyüktür*”), the five referencing the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).⁸ He frequently uses this sentence to

⁷ John Sakkas and Nataliya Zhukova, “The Soviet Union, Turkey and the Cyprus Problem, 1967-1974,” *Les cahiers Irice*, Vol. 10, No. 10 (2013): p. 123-35.

⁸ According to available data, Erdoğan seemed to coin the sentence for the first time in 2013: Berdal Alan, “The World Is Bigger than Five”: A Salutary Manifesto of Turkey's New International Outlook,” *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (2019): p. 71.

denounce the ineffectiveness and failures of the UNSC in the face of global crises from Palestine to Ukraine. The Turkish interference in the Libyan and Syrian Civil Wars in the neo-Ottomanist direction, or direct Turkish support to Azerbaijan in the Second Karabakh War (2020) with more nationalist motivations, further illustrating Ankara's desire to play a more active role in the region.

As another *humilié*, like Russia and China, Türkiye found it reasonable, pragmatic, and beneficial to refuse to participate in Western sanctions against Russia since the invasion of Ukraine despite all the explicit warnings and threats coming from Washington and Brussels. However, Ankara did not stop supporting Kiev through financial and military means. This dual policy can only be explained by the resilience of the Turkish foreign policy. The interesting turn to reestablish relations with Armenia, Israel, Egypt, and Gulf countries is a sign of the dimensions of this resilience. Another striking example is the toxic relationship between the Turkish state and NATO. While fulfilling its military duty as it has the second largest army in NATO, Türkiye has not accepted Finland and Sweden's bid for the same reasons. Only after realizing its power and resilience limits can Türkiye use them to execute its regional and worldwide foreign policy aims.

Middle State

Türkiye's pursuit of a new place in the multipolar world led to new alliances or stronger partnerships with other regional and global powers. Russia and the United Kingdom, respectively, greatly impact Turkish foreign policy and perception of international affairs. The former is an excellent example to demonstrate the resilience of Turkish diplomacy. A historical nemesis, Russia became an economic partner after the fall of the Soviet Union. The two countries were on the brink of armed conflict when the Turkish air force shot down a Russian military aircraft in 2015. However, since the coup d'état attempt in 2016, both parties have enjoyed high-level cooperation and collaboration in many fields.

The relations between Ankara and London exhibit how Türkiye's pursuit of a balance of power impact its foreign policy. Türkiye has benefited from its geopolitical importance and cultural ties with neighboring peoples since the nineteenth century. It is neither Eastern nor Western, but still both. It has direct access to the Mediterranean, Black Sea, and Caspian. Therefore, London perceives it as the guardian of future continental defense structures, which could extend from Poland to Azerbaijan and the exit door of the new Silk Road. Moreover, the improving relations with Turkic states in Central Asia and South Caucasus offer Ankara and its partners, London in this case, leverage in any issue concerning China and Russia. A Brexited-Britain,

which seeks to bypass Europe, needs Türkiye, and the relations between the two have significantly developed since the coup attempt.

Connecting worlds to worlds and playing with rivals and enemies, Türkiye maintains its regional power as the Middle State, or Central State despite the financial and domestic political crises for a long time. Following the footsteps of the Ottoman and republican diplomats, Turkish foreign policy actors seize the moment to adapt to the multipolar world.

Relying on its imperial legacy, Türkiye has been a contender in regional politics since the early 2010s. However, it also adopted a traditional foreign policy principle to adapt to the new multipolar world in the contemporary period, which can be called the new nineteenth century: seeking the balance of power. Türkiye can only fully use its strength and resilience after acknowledging their limits to achieve its regional and global foreign policy objectives. Then, it can arise as a reliable mediator in the current crises and an influential actor in international politics.